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SUBJECT Alleged Spy Ring

PETER JENNINGS: Attorney General Edwin Meese told reporters today there may still be more arrests pending in the case of the alleged spy ring that the government believes sold military secrets to the Soviet Union. All the attention given to the Walker family has caused many people to wonder, what is it that makes someone willing to betray his country? Is it belief in a cause, or is it the profit motive?

We have a status report from our chief correspondent, Richard Threlkeld.

RICHARD THRELKELD: The Walker family affair (father, son, uncle, and old Navy buddy) looks to become the most notorious spy case in a generation. Four men America trusted with her secrets now accused of selling them to the Russians for the past 20 years, with as yet untold damage to the security of our nuclear submarine force.

You've got to go all the way back to Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were executed after they were convicted of selling the atom bomb secrets to Moscow, to make a comparison -- really a contrast -- with today.

ADMIRAL BOBBY INMAN: The Thirties and the Forties, most spy cases, the spies were involved for ideological reasons. And we called them traitors. In the modern day, there's not a single case that I'm aware of where ideology played at all. People selling secrets for cash.

THRELKELD: In the past decade, while America's been building up its defenses, three dozen American citizens have been convicted of selling our defense secrets, primarily to the

Communist Bloc. Another dozen or so are accused of it.

How could that happen? For one thing, we've got a lot more secrets, 20 million of them, according to Senator William Cohen, who thinks that's too many.

SENATOR WILLIAM COHEN: Whenever you classify everything, you classify nothing.

THRELKELD: And too many people with access to them. Four million Americans with security clearances in the military and in defense industries, and so few people to check up on them, they're checked, on the average, only ever 17 years.

And more foreign agents to recruit American turncoats than ever. There are 4000 officials from the Communist Bloc now in America, perhaps a third of them full- or part-time spy recruiters.

Zdzislaw Rurarj, the Polish Ambassador in Tokyo defected here, used to be one of them.

ZDZISLAW RURARJ: Well, in an open society it's easy because you can establish the contacts practically with everybody.

THRELKELD: An open society that treats the espionage game as something sexy.

NEWSWOMAN: Johnny clearly loves his work. And why not? He's out there doing what other people can only watch on TV.

THRELKELD: John Walker, the alleged leader of the Walker spy ring, ran a detective agency and was featured in this admiring TV magazine profile.

JOHN WALKER: Just the fact is the device that was found that automatically turns the tape recorder on. It could be hidden anywhere.

THRELKELD: At this point, the authorities say, only John Walker and Moscow knew what his real job was.

WALKER: If anything, in fact, what we do is more exciting and more dramatic than what you see on television.

THRELKELD: Curiously, like Walker, most of the other Americans who've been arrested for spying for dollars are white, Anglo-Saxon, middle Americans, straight-arrow types who seemed to be 110 percent patriotic.

SENATOR COHEN: In fact, they are traitors. They may

mask their treason by raising false colors of being patriots or conservatives or anti-Soviets as such, but basically they're greedy losers, as you've said, who are out to make some easy money at the expense of the security of the American people.

THRELKELD: And once they've signed on, for whatever reason, it's a job they don't quit.

RURARJ: Once such a person fell in a trap, he could be later blackmailed or, quite simply, may even like it. Many people want to be some kind of heroes. It doesn't matter whether in a good or bad cause, you know.

CHRISTOPHER BOYCE: I think I had the same view of espionage that most young people in this country have now. And that's that espionage is a glamorous thing. But in reality, it really is not.

THRELKELD: Christopher Boyce is serving 68 years in federal prison for selling secrets to the Communists. And this week on ABC's Nightline he told Ted Koppel what it's really like to be a spy.

BOYCE: The reality of espionage hits you about a week after it begins, and you just realize that you've blundered, and it's just something that you're going to have to carry around forever. It isn't going to ever end.

THRELKELD: Once you fall into that trap, can you ever get out of that trap?

RURARJ: Well, I'd say not. I'd say not.

THRELKELD: There are a lot of prescriptions being offered for how to protect ourselves from these new American traitors without returning to the security paranoia of the 1950s. But one thing we ought to keep in mind.

SENATOR COHEN: There will still be spies. There will still be people who will sell out the interests of their country. We can make it tougher for the Soviet Union, but we can't make it impossible.